

Helping Improve Family Stability and Child Well-Being

Background

Between 2002 and 2004, The Nicholson Foundation initiated discussions with Newark's government officials and community representatives to determine how the Foundation could facilitate improvements in the lives of the City's families and children. The community stakeholders were particularly concerned about the serious social and economic challenges negatively affecting families. Half of Newark's families were poor or low income, and 45% were headed by single parents. Fifty percent of babies born in Newark had low birth weights and/or were born prematurely. One third of Newark adults lacked a high school diploma; almost half of its youth failed to complete high school. Nearly 10% of the City's children were either in out-of-home placement (foster care, group homes, or an institution) or in their own homes under the supervision of the State's child welfare agency; close to ten percent were being raised by their grandparents. The City had one of the highest numbers of per capita police-reported domestic violence incidents and requests for restraining orders in New Jersey. One in six Newark adults was a convicted felon, and many neighborhoods were plagued by high concentrations of crime.

Research shows that each of these challenges can pose a serious risk to family stability and child well-being. Typically, these challenges have been addressed with interventions that target one or several specific problems. However, the Foundation and its partners realized that the cumulative social and economic factors perpetuating intergenerational family dysfunction and slowing the City's renewal required a different approach. Cognizant that families are the most critical element both in a child's development and in the health of a community, the Foundation began to focus its efforts on understanding the issues that affect family stability and developing strategies to strengthen parents' capacity to nurture their children.

Research indicates that children are more likely to become healthy and productive adults when their families are stable. Poverty, unemployment, and low education levels can diminish parental capacity for consistent and involved parenting. When families experience these life stresses, stable and nurturing relationships necessary for a child's healthy development can be disrupted. Domestic violence, homelessness or inadequate housing, and lack of social supports often overwhelm parents, as can caring for children who are developmentally disabled or who exhibit emotional or behavioral problems. Substance abuse, health problems, and mental illness can also lead to inadequate parenting. Some parents simply

lack the knowledge and skills to provide a stable and nurturing environment for their children. Not only are these circumstances more prevalent among poor and low-income families, but families with fewer resources also have more difficulty coping with them.

Helping Vulnerable Families

To address the risks and challenges to Newark's families, the Foundation and its community partners met with experts in family services, visited model programs, and reviewed the literature to determine how best to improve the lives of vulnerable families. One approach that appeared particularly effective was implementing community-based family services, which aid parents in their efforts to provide a stable home, be better parents, and help their children achieve better life outcomes. Community-based services can prevent family problems from escalating to the point of crisis, thereby reducing the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. In disadvantaged communities like Newark, however, vulnerable families often lack the skills necessary to access the services that are available.

Recognizing that community-based services can help parents overcome the challenges to their family's stability and their children's well-being, the Foundation and its partners initiated projects to strengthen the capacity of Newark's families and communities to support healthy child development. In developing these programs with its partners, the Foundation worked to integrate an empirically-based understanding of the underlying processes of family dynamics and child development, as well as the way in which socio-economic risk factors impact family functioning. In addition, findings on best practices were incorporated into these programs. The Foundation is optimistic about the potential impact of these programs because the research suggests that family stability and consistent and positive parenting can compensate for the challenges so prevalent in Newark, such as poverty and single parenthood, which can have harmful effects on children's development.

Another best practice identified was the integration of human-service delivery systems in one-stop centers. This model entails providing the full array of social services to individuals in a single location, facilitating coordination across delivery systems and minimizing service fragmentation. In an attempt to integrate this best practice, the Foundation and its partners based the community family programs on the one-stop service model. For vulnerable families, with multiple and complex service needs, the goal was to integrate and coordinate services at centralized, neighborhood-based hubs.

An additional aim was to develop specialized one-stop centers to serve populations with unique needs, including grandparents, non-custodial fathers, and victims of domestic violence. All of these centers,

directly or through referrals, provide services designed to enhance family stability and self-sufficiency and to promote better life outcomes for children. The Foundation and its partners were hopeful that implementing this model would improve the lives of Newark's vulnerable families and the communities in which they live and in the longer term, begin to break the cycle of intergenerational family and community dysfunction.

Family Success Centers

The Family Support Services model, which began as a grass-roots movement in the 1970s, aims to promote healthy families and children by providing voluntary, informal, and neighborhood-based services. Over the following two decades, family support centers, also known as family resource centers, became more widespread and accepted as an approach to help parents improve their parenting skills and mitigate the stresses that can compromise the healthy development of children. In 2001, a federally-financed meta-analysis of studies of family support programs found that they led to small but statistically significant improvements in a number of important indicators of family and child well-being. These indicators measured the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children; parenting attitudes, knowledge, and behavior; and family functioning.

In 2006, the Foundation joined with the City of Newark and Newark Now, a local non-profit provider, to establish a network of community centers in Newark based on the family support model. The centers' services were designed to reflect the model's basic principles:

- staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect;
- staff enhances families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members—adults, youth and children;
- programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society;
- programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process;
- programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served; and
- practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.

Initially, three centers—referred to as Family Success Centers (FSCs)—were opened in public housing projects located in Newark's most disadvantaged neighborhoods. These neighborhood hubs are easily

accessible, family-friendly, and culturally sensitive. They are staffed by both professionals and neighborhood residents. The Centers serve all families in a particular neighborhood and offer both on-site services and linkages to a wide range of community resources. Key elements of their services include a comprehensive assessment of the family's strengths and needs and the development of a family stability plan that serves as a guide to service referrals and linkages.

Typical on-site FSC services include benefit counseling, parent education, parent-child activities, information about child development and educational resources, and support groups. Referrals are made to community agencies for help with health, mental health, and substance abuse problems and for assistance with educational and employment services. These services play a critical role in helping families minimize crises and provide a safe and nurturing home, thereby reducing the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.

The FSCs have developed collaborative relationships with a number of service organizations to provide additional on-site services tailored to the needs of each community. To address the difficulties that families experience in accessing and maintaining public benefits, including welfare and Medicaid, the FSCs are collaborating with Single Stop USA to use their software-aided eligibility screening for a range of government benefits. The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey has periodically provided medical services through their mobile outreach van, and several community agencies provide monthly workshops on anti-violence topics, such as domestic violence awareness and conflict resolution.

Consistent with the Foundation's beliefs in the importance of coordinating services and evaluating the programs it funds, the Foundation has been supporting the development and implementation of a unified FSC data management system. This system will enable each center to monitor a family's service needs, referrals, and outcomes; provide information on the operation of each center; allow comparison of service levels and effectiveness among the centers; serve as an evaluation tool to improve service delivery; and provide data for outcomes analyses.

Following the successful implementation of Newark's initial three FSCs, The Nicholson Foundation and local community stakeholders supported one additional Center in Newark and three in the urban areas of nearby Essex and Union Counties.

Specialized Family Success Centers

While the FSCs are designed to serve all families in the neighborhoods where they are located, the Foundation recognized that there are families with exceptional needs who would be better served through specialized one-stop support centers.

Grandfamily Support Center

In Newark, thousands of grandparents are raising grandchildren, keeping families together when parents are unable to care for their children, often because of substance abuse, health and/or mental health problems, incarceration, or death. Since many of these children had been living in chaotic family environments, and some had been abused and/or neglected, meeting their health, mental health and educational needs can be very challenging for the new caregivers.

Children living with grandparents or other relatives—a living arrangement referred to as kinship care—may face continued risks to their healthy development, such as poverty, overcrowded housing, and poorly educated caregivers, many of whom may also have chronic health problems. Most of these families are not receiving the benefit of formal kinship foster care, which would provide them access to substantial financial resources and a wide array of services. Children who are living with relatives are eligible for foster care, welfare, or a special kinship board payment, but only 25% of them receive these benefits. In spite of being eligible, more than half of all kinship children do not receive Medicaid benefits, yet they are twice as likely to have a limiting health condition as children being raised by their parent(s).

Although assistance from government and private sources is available for these families, the kinship caregivers may not be aware of the services to which they and the children are entitled, or know how to access them. Because of their family history, they may be reluctant, or fearful, to ask for help. To assist these caregivers, the City of Newark, The Salvation Army, and The Nicholson Foundation partnered to open the one-stop Grandfamily Support Center. The Center, which is the first in New Jersey, provides a safe and comfortable environment for grandparents and other caregiving relatives to access services designed to meet the special needs of their families.

The Grandfamily Support Center offers legal assistance to help families establish custody, guardianship, and, when eligible, obtain kinship foster payments. Since many of the families face financial hardships, the Center provides counseling and assistance in accessing welfare, food stamps, Medicaid and Social Security benefits, as well as emergency food, furniture, and clothing. Housing assistance is available for families who may need to relocate to accommodate their changing space needs. To help the kinship caregivers address the many stresses brought on by their new responsibilities, services are available both on-

site and through referrals to community agencies. Such services include on-site support groups, child-care, and respite services, as well as referrals for health, mental health and educational services. On-site services for children include counseling, tutoring, and recreational activities.

Comprehensive Centers for Fathers

Research shows that when both parents are positively involved with their children, the children are more likely to go on to lead healthy and productive lives. Children with involved and caring fathers, including non-custodial fathers, are significantly more likely to do well in school, exhibit fewer behavior problems, be emotionally secure, and have better social relations with peers. Fathers who are involved with their children provide economic and other practical support to the family, which helps mothers cope with the stresses of parenthood.

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, an examination of unmarried parents, found that in Newark almost all of the fathers surveyed wanted to be involved with their children, and a significant number of the mothers wanted them to be, as well. However, the study highlighted a number of barriers that can make establishing a parental relationship difficult. The fathers may be unemployed or have low earnings, have been incarcerated, have a poor relationship with the child's mother, or lack the parenting skills to be an involved father.

Recognizing that many low-income fathers are not able to support their children and that fathers who are unable to contribute financially are more likely to avoid contact with them, a number of localities around the country have implemented responsible fatherhood programs. Recent evidence suggests that these programs have demonstrated some success in positively affecting the lives of families and children.

The Foundation is supporting two Comprehensive Centers for Fathers (CCF), one in Newark with Newark Now and one in Camden with the Community Planning and Advocacy Council. Adopting the well-regarded model developed by the National Comprehensive Center for Fathers in Philadelphia, the New Jersey CCFs work with men who have lost their jobs and homes, or who are re-entering the workforce following incarceration, and who seek to assume greater responsibility for and contribute to their children's lives. Often these men are unemployed and disconnected from their children and children's mothers. Many lack good parenting skills because they did not have fathers who were good role models.

CCF services are specifically designed to help fathers overcome barriers to positive relationships with their children. They help fathers become self-sufficient, comply with their child support responsibilities, re-connect with their children, and develop better parenting skills. Educational assistance, employment

preparation, and placement services are offered to help the men improve their chances of obtaining a job at a decent wage. Legal services help the fathers with establishing paternity, visitation, and child support issues. Counseling, father-child activities, support groups, and mentoring help the men learn how to engage with their children and become better fathers.

Family Justice Center Initiative

Research suggests that children exposed to violence within their homes face significant developmental risks. The risk of child abuse is much higher in families where domestic violence has been reported, with more than one-third of physical assaults on partners also involving children, either as victims or witnesses. Under the stress of repeated episodes of domestic violence, a mother is often not able to adequately care for her children. Victims of family violence, who are often physically and emotionally traumatized and fearful for their safety and the safety of their children, find it difficult to navigate among the multitude of government and community agencies that offer services to meet their needs.

The Foundation has been collaborating with Partners for Women and Justice to develop a specialized one-stop multi-disciplinary center for victims of family violence in Essex County, modeled on the successful San Diego Family Justice Center. The Family Justice Center model has been identified as a best practice in domestic violence intervention and prevention services.

The primary services to be made available on-site at the Essex County Family Justice Center include crisis intervention, safety planning, emergency shelter, medical assistance, and counseling for victims and family members, as well as access to police, prosecutors, civil legal assistance, and the criminal and family courts. By housing and coordinating needed resources in one specialized place, the Center will provide victims of domestic violence and their children easier access to the full range of services they need.

Government's Commitment to Helping Vulnerable Families

The multiplicity and complexity of the issues facing economically and socially disadvantaged families require interventions on the broadest possible scale to break the cycle of intergenerational family and community dysfunction. In a sign of their commitment, the City of Newark and the State of New Jersey have taken essential first steps by supporting and expanding the programs initiated by the Foundation and its community partners.

City of Newark

In 2006, within the first 100 days of Mayor Booker's term in office, Newark's City Council approved a Children's Bill of Rights, affirming that Newark's children have the right to have

- (1) nurturing and responsible parents, caregivers, and family members;
- (2) safe homes, schools, and neighborhoods that will preserve a child's dignity, respect, and freedom from discrimination;
- (3) good nutrition, a decent permanent home, clean air, and healthy drinking water;
- (4) accessible, quality physical and behavioral healthcare;
- (5) age and developmentally appropriate care, guidance, and education; and
- (6) meaningful spiritual, cultural, and recreational experiences.

The City, moreover, has been a key partner in developing all the Newark-based Family Success and specialized one-stop family centers.

The State of New Jersey

In 2007, the New Jersey Department of Children and Families began funding a statewide network of family support centers to replicate the Newark-based Family Success Centers. The Department's Commissioner noted at the time:

The Family Success Centers we are funding today are part of Governor Corzine's vision and commitment to build a robust network of local services to enrich the lives of children and empower families in their own neighborhoods. We are hopeful that our partnership with Mayor Booker, and nonprofit agencies across the state, will improve indicators of childhood wellbeing in the future.

The State currently funds a network of thirty-seven Family Success Centers that provide comprehensive services to families throughout New Jersey. Including the seven Centers being supported by the Foundation, forty-four Family Success Centers are operating in New Jersey.

References

- Association of Children of New Jersey. *Newark Kids Count 2005: A Snapshot of Child Well-Being*. Newark, New Jersey: Association of Children of New Jersey, 2005.
- Booker, Cory A. *Newark: The First Hundred Day Plan Report*. Presented by the Honorable Mayor Corey A. Booker, Mayor and the Municipal City Council, October 2006.
- DeKlyen, Michelle, Kevin Bradway, and Sarah McLanahan. *The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, Newark First Follow-Up Report*. Newark, New Jersey: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2005.
- Gomby, Deanna S. and Lisa W. Deal. *Helping Grandparents Raise Grandchildren Who Succeed*. Discussion Guide Series: Investing in Strategies to Help Vulnerable Children and Families. San Francisco: Association of Small Foundations, April 2008.
- Harbison, Elizabeth, Joanna Parnes, and Jennifer Macomber. *Vulnerable Infants and Toddlers in Four Service Systems*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2007.
- Harden, Brenda Jones. "Safety and Stability for Foster Children: A Developmental Perspective." *Future of Children* (Princeton, New Jersey) 14, no.1 (Winter 2004).
- Kumpfer, Karol. *Strengthening America's Families: Exemplary Parenting and Family Strategies for Delinquency Prevention*. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Juvenile Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, 1999.
- Layzer, Jean I., Barbara D. Goodson, Lawrence Bernstein, Cristofor Price (Abt Associates of Cambridge, Massachusetts). *The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, Newark Baseline Report, Final Report Volume A: The Meta-Analysis*. A report prepared for the Administration of Children, Youth, and Families, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Washington, DC: DHHS, April 2001.
- Macomber, Jennifer Ehrle. *An Overview of Selected Data on Children in Vulnerable Families*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2006.
- Macomber, Jennifer Ehrle and Rob Geen. *Children Cared for By Relatives: What Services Do They Need?* Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2002.
- Martinson, Karin and Demetra Smith Nightingale. *Ten Key Findings from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2008.
- McLanahan, Sarah, Irwin Garfinkle, and Marcia Carlson. *The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, Newark Baseline Report*. Newark, New Jersey: Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2000.
- Moore, Kristin Anderson. *Defining the Term "At-Risk."* Washington, DC: Child Trends, Publication #2006-12, 2006.

New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety. *Crime in New Jersey—2002 Uniform Crime Report: Section III - State and County Arrest Summary*. West Trenton, NJ: State of New Jersey, Division of State Police, Uniform Crime Reporting Unit, 2002.

New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety. *Crime Reports and Statistics— Twenty-fourth Annual Domestic Violence Offense Report*. West Trenton, NJ: State of New Jersey State Of New Jersey, Division of State Police, Uniform Crime Reporting Unit, 2006.

New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect. *Standards for Prevention Programs: Building Success Through Family Support*. State of New Jersey, Department of Human Services, 2003.

The Urban Institute. *Children in Vulnerable Families: Facts and Figures*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2006.